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DOI:

[10.1177/1367877917694093](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917694093)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Moreno-Almeida, C. (2018). Reporting on selective voices of 'resistance': Secularism, class and 'Islamist' rap . *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(4), 343-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917694093>

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**Reporting on selective voices of *resistance*: secularism, class and
Islamist rap**

Abstract

Since the 2010-2011 popular uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), rap music has served commentators to channel stories of disenfranchisement and oppression among the region's youth. Accounts that portray rappers as significant political actors, however, reproduce narratives of *resistance* that focus on opposition to governance but overlook social inequalities. Further, the case studies of two Moroccan rappers illustrate that commentators value criticisms of social inequalities as long as they are not framed with a religious ethos. Term such as *Islamist rap* serve to discredit dissent proving that when it comes to reporting on Moroccan rap, journalists and academics disregard local expressions of grievance more related to class issues than to modes of governance. Through discourse analysis, open-ended interviews and ethnography (2011-2015), this paper states the urgency to shed light on important voices of social and political dissent silenced due to a disregard for class biases.

Keywords

Islamist, rap, MENA, Morocco, resistance, 'Arab Spring', secularism.

Diverse ideological and political underpinnings shape cultural production in Morocco. These are related to the three main cultural patrons: the monarchy, Islamists groups, and leftists secular liberal groups.¹ While alliances between Islamists and secular liberal groups have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is undeniable that the relationship between these groups is still difficult (Cavatorta, 2009: 141). In Morocco, while Islamists groups have a large number of followers, leftists liberal secular groups' power resides in the fact that even if smaller in number they are often run by members of the French educated elites (Cavatorta, 2009: 148). In the aftermath of the 2010-2011 uprisings that swept the MENA region, the field of culture

has embodied these power relations between monarchy, Islamists and secular liberals through reports on rap music in newspapers, magazines, and the work of some academics that have shaped rappers' songs to approach them to particular ideologies and depict them as the dominant voices of opposition in the MENA region. The case of rap music in a postcolonial setting and a Muslim majority country like Morocco presents an opportunity to disclose within a Cultural Studies approach how narratives of cultural *resistance* cater to Western audiences mainly channelling opposition to governance but ignore class struggles.

The contention between which are the significant themes and which are not is also present in rap music prompted by the emergence of *political* or *conscious* rap in the United States between 1987 and 1994. Since then, a *good* versus *bad* binary has created expectations that rap should focus on 'socially conscious discourse' (Watkins, 2005: 21) in opposition to 'commercial rap' music (See Spady et al., 1999). Rap in North Africa and the Middle East is no exception. However, contrary to the US, *conscious* rap as a tool of resistance is embedded within European secular liberal thought. Morocco serves as a case study to show that criticisms to socio-economic inequalities are only linked to conscious, political and therefore *good* rap in the region if songs do not show significant traces of Islamic ethos or a political Islam agenda. The fact that reports often overlook class biases suggests that the hegemony of these elite groups in capitalising on rap music to disseminate their own narratives obscure the complexities of local cultural fields, the power dynamics of postcolonial contexts and ultimately, voices of opposition that resonate with the country's poor.

The case studies of two Moroccan rappers support the argument of this paper. First, journalists have capitalised on rapper L7a9ed² (pronounced Lhaqed and meaning

the enraged or outraged) – one Moroccan rapper who became known during the MENA uprisings – to present the case of a young *conscious* rapper fighting oppressive regimes. His personal story of oppression is highlighted due to his opposition and several encounters with the Moroccan state and security apparatus. Second, the case of rapper Muslim, pioneer of Moroccan rap and one of the most well-known artists in Morocco serves to show that commentators overlook stories of poverty and injustice when these stories are believed to be part of a political Islam agenda. Despite the fact that Muslim is better known than L7a9ed and from a similar socio-economic background, international media and some academics find him uninteresting since he does not provide with appealing headlines, and his lyrics are considered too religious to fit into European secular liberal narratives on *resistance* even if the rapper's songs appeal to a large number of unprivileged youth.

Methodologically, this paper takes a triple mode of research (discourse analysis, open-ended interviews and ethnography) approach carried out in 2011-2015 in Morocco. This methodology favours the identification of dominant themes of representation, as well as presenting a more complex picture of intents and motivations. Hall's (1981) and Fairclough's (1995: 81) understanding that in reporting news ideological positions are constructed while others are marginalized lays the grounds for this paper. This framework allows me to look at media narratives in line with dominant discourses on secularism and Islam, the disconnection with local artists' discourses and the way their work is 'decoded' (Hall, 1980) by Moroccan audiences. Conceptually, drawing on James C. Scott (1990), Tricia Rose (1994) and John Street (2012), this paper engages with the idea that songs of *resistance* do not necessarily require an obvious *Political* aim or enemy, however, it argues that music of resistance needs to be

contextualised acknowledging local and global political and ideological discourses in determining the politics of music.

The soundtrack of the revolution

Since the 2010-2011 MENA uprisings, a large number of newspaper and magazine articles have invested in stories portraying what they consider to be the voices of the revolution. Much of this coverage has placed rap in the spotlight presenting rappers as figureheads of pro-democracy movements and explicitly pointing out rap as the music of the revolution (See *Time* (15 February 2011),³ *Time Magazine* (17 February 17 2011),⁴ *The Nation* (27 August 2011)⁵ or the online blog *Muftah* (28 May 2011).⁶ The French newspaper *Le Monde* (11 January 2011) in an article called ‘Le rap, porte-parole de la jeunesse Tunisienne’⁷ (Rap, the Spokesperson of Tunisian Youth); *The Guardian* (27 February 2011) ‘But it took a rapper to galvanize Tunisia’s youth...’⁸; and *BBC News* (24 July 2011) in an article called ‘Is hip hop driving the Arab Spring?’⁹ and academic works published after 2011 have also granted a central role to rap during the popular upheavals (See for example Gana, 2012: 25; Howard and Hussain, 2013: 47; Ovshieva, 2013: 37).

Commentators’ assumption of an artistic common political agenda in opposition to the state fails to capture the complexities of the region’s cultural fields. This assumption may be understood as part of what Lila Abu Lughod (1990) identifies as a tendency to look for forms of resistance and resisters. The proclivity to view rappers as rebellious young people is clear in two chapters of the edited collection *Contemporary Morocco* (Maddy-Weitzman and Zisenwine, 2013) where Aomar Boum and Samir Ben-Layashi respectively homogenise and categorise rappers as a uniform group of ‘new

rebels' (Boum, 2013: 174) and 'revolutionaries and 'anarchists' hip-hop youngsters' (Ben-Layashi, 2013: 151). Ben-Layashi in particular articulates the image of revolutionary youth in terms of looks and language. Rap audiences are described as 'modern and sometimes anarchist looks (black-t-shirts, sunglasses, tattoos, baseball hats)' attributing young Moroccan with a highly complex political and philosophical consciousness solely based on their physical appearance. What Ben-Layashi sees as anarchist looks is arguably the triumph of capitalism with rappers all around the world wearing Nike and Adidas clothes (Chang, 2000: 25) and emphasizing a *cool* life style (Osumare, 2007: 150), or a desire to associate with a globalised hip hop culture.

In spite of characterising rappers as 'new rebels,' some Moroccan rappers have been accused of siding with the State in times of social and political turmoil, especially during the demonstrations that took place in Morocco throughout 2011. Famed Moroccan rapper Don Bigg who had been praised for his crude lyrics denouncing social inequalities, became in 2011 a leading voice against the pro-democracy 20 February movement (20F).¹⁰ The rapper released a song and music video against this movement, referring to it as the 'Party of Donkeys'. Opposite narratives where rappers are praised for siding with oppositional movements also emerged during this time. In an article published in *Al-Jazeera English*,¹¹ scholar Mark Levine illustrates the story of a young man from Casablanca who was jailed in 2011. The article presents this man as a rapper praising him for his connection to the 20F movement. An unknown rapper in Morocco until arrested in September 2011, Levine affirms that Mouad Belghouat –known as L7a9ed– is 'one of the best Arab world rappers'. Other articles that take a similar slant describe L7a9ed as a 'political rap star' (*National Public Radio* 6 January 2012)¹² or a poet (*France 24* 4 April 2012).¹³ Similar cases of artists in the MENA region changing

their political narratives have also been well documented (Kraidy, 2015; Lohman, 2009).¹⁴

Framing rappers as co-opted State agents or revolutionary young people is, however, reductionist. Stuart Hall's (1981) perception of popular culture as a battlefield, that is, an arena of constant and uneven struggle marked by contradictions is helpful in breaking from simplistic views on rap in the region. As I have argued elsewhere, rappers in Morocco have used both co-option and rebellion in a creative amalgamation by siding at times with dominant powers but also opening and broadening networks of participation (Moreno Almeida, 2013, 2016). Despite praising adjectives, accounts on rapper L7a9ed are limited to narrating the rapper's personal story since his incarceration. Evidence of local audience reception of his work or the rapper's artistry (punchlines, flow, lyrics, rhymes etc.) is absent from these articles. The focus on stories where artists are imprisoned by oppressive regimes is in line with Claire Bishop's (2012) claims that the social component of art is celebrated over artistic experiences. In this sense, these accounts consider the mere act of producing a rap song and being persecuted for it an act of *resistance*. In an attempt to describe L7a9ed's significance, LeVine refers to his music as 'highly politicised.' One needs to question, what does political mean in this account and why is L7a9ed exceptional? Highly problematic *good* versus *bad* debates take place without drawing on the opinions of audiences, and yet, the voices of the journalist or scholar are clearly articulated. The next section addresses these questions to show how L7a9ed's story has been decontextualized and reshaped to fit into a narrative that caters to Western media audiences and Western liberal secularism.

The *good* rapper

On 9 September 2011, young Mouad Belghouat was accused of attacking an organizer of an anti-20F group, detained, and imprisoned for four months.¹⁵ Unknown in Morocco's cultural scene until then, international media headlines began referring to Mouad, using his stage name L7a9ed, as *a rapper* and leading readers to believe that his detention was connected to his music production.¹⁶ Months later, on 11 May 2012, Moroccan authorities arrested L7a9ed again.¹⁷ This time he was accused of using images judged as offensive in a YouTube music video of his song 'Klab Dawla'¹⁸ (Dogs of the State) (2010), a collaboration with rapper Proof 3askri. The original video which represented the Moroccan police as donkeys has since then been deleted¹⁹ although another one reproducing the image for which L7a9ed was sentenced to prison is still available.²⁰ In the track, L7a9ed and Proof 3askri denounce police abuse describing how young people in Morocco are affected by police profiling emphasising the importance of the socio-economic background in these actions. Despite this song's theme, expressions of discontent with the state are allowed in Morocco as long as they do not cross any of the country's 'red lines', which are criticism to the monarchy, questioning Islam, or challenging Morocco's territorial integrity, especially regarding sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Despite the fact that L7a9ed has crossed these lines in other songs, this is not the case for 'Klab Dawla.'

The fact that his arrest is not related to his music, but to his militancy in a social and political movement is well grounded. To start with, the song 'Klab Dawla' was originally released in 2008²¹ and was uploaded to YouTube and to a Skyrock blog²² on October 2010. The song thus existed well before his arrest on May 2012. Secondly, L7a9ed has always insisted that he was not behind the disparaging images in the music

video.²³ Thirdly, in Morocco, a moderate criticism of the police is allowed, as evidenced by songs where rappers championed by the State, like Don Bigg and H-Kayne condemn police oppression. This criticism is also visually evident in the official music video of Don Bigg's track 'Mabghitch'²⁴ (2011) (I Don't Want To) that shows a wall bearing the message 'Fuck the police.' None of these rappers have ever been arrested for these songs. The question is, why L7a9ed and not the others? The Moroccan French language magazine *TelQuel* asked this in an editorial dedicated to L7a9ed.²⁵ I argue that there are two main differences: one, none of the well-known rappers by mid-2011 openly supported the 20F; and two, in 2011, H-Kayne and Don Bigg were empowered artists with large fan bases supported by some sectors of the secular civil society and by the Moroccan state. The arrest of any established artists in the midst of 2011 social unrests could have dangerously intensified popular demonstrations with young fans taking the streets in support of renowned artists and hence causing even more discontent in the country. The fact that L7a9ed was detained a third time accused of illegally scalping tickets for the Casablanca football derby further supports the idea that the State was targeting this rapper, and thus, showing its persecution against members of the 20F.²⁶

The idea that this case was a warning to more established rappers with many more followers of what could happen to them if they joined the pro-democracy movement cannot be discarded. Within the first weeks of February 2011, some rappers including H-Kayne had announced their support for the call to demonstrate on 20 February –what would be the germ of 20F movement– through their Facebook page.²⁷ Days after the demonstration, local news websites were already reporting on other rappers from the Casablanca crew Thug Gang, Koman and Philo, as the *voices of the movement* because they had released the song 'Ta3bir Chafawi' (Oral Expression) in

support of the protesters. As Philo said in our interview, this was an old song denouncing social injustice that they thought would help to support the 20 February demonstrations.²⁸ However, once Koman and Philo claimed not to speak *for* the movement, journalists stopped calling. While these rappers support the pro-democracy outcry of Moroccan society, they did not want their songs to be associated solely with a movement. Another rap crew called LBassline, who at the beginning had also openly declared its affiliation of the movement, later retracted.²⁹ Rappers not wanting to be trapped within this new social movement was not surprising in a country where youth look at the political system and civil society with mistrust. Indeed the State's narrative demonizing the 20F also proved to be effective in convincing the population that the movement's aim was to divide the country and, after the new constitution approved in July 2011, it was no longer necessary.³⁰ In addition, by the time of L7a9ed's first detention in September 2011, the 20F had lost much of its political momentum and was deeply affected by internal differences (Belghazi and Moudden, 2016). Scepticism on the 20F was asserted by rapper Muslim, who released a freestyle song in 2013 where he said: 'I'm not February 20, I'm the whole year,' pointing out that to be an activist it is not necessary to belong to any movement.

Even if L7a9ed's discourse is class-oriented, the story is interesting because he has been targeted by the Moroccan security apparatus due to his relation to a movement that commentators have homogenously shaped as secular.³¹ Some academics have argued that the Arab Spring was a *secular* phenomenon (Hoffman and Jamal, 2014: 594) where protesters 'displayed attributes of moral secularism' (Khalaf and Khalaf, 2012: 7) and were 'not dominated by unions, existing political parties, clear political ideologies, or religious fervor' (Howard and Hussain, 2013: 28). L7a9ed's arrest is

framed by international media headlines as part of the state's will to halt the democratic process started by secular young Arab Spring protesters: 'Rapper's Imprisonment Tests Moroccan Reforms' (*National Public Radio* 6 January 2012)³² or 'Moroccans see limits of reform in rapper's case' (*BBC* 25 November 2011).³³ This language of reforms brings up the idea that the region is in a constant road to democracy or return to authoritarianism (Cavatorta and Durac, 2011: 1). None of these articles, refer to the common resentment in the region against the way power, embodied by the ruling elites, treat the people with disdain. This class division is encapsulated in the notion of *hogra*, meaning contempt, a term frequently used across the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) to report abuses by the elites over lower socio-economic groups. These commentators have focused on the language of reform as part of a democratization agenda framed within European liberal thought while marginalising the rapper's denunciation of *hogra* which is part the local language of criticisms, not only to governance, but to class inequalities.

The politics of *Islamist* rap

The number of articles on local and foreign press concerning L7a9ed has been inversely proportional to those on Muslim, one of the Moroccan rappers with the largest number of followers. While being one of the most notable and respected rappers by young audiences in Morocco, French language Moroccan media outlets, independent documentaries on the Moroccan rap scene, independent, until recently, and state-funded music festivals have all systematically marginalized rapper Muslim (Moreno Almeida, 2013). Part of the disregard for Muslim as a symbol of resistance is related to the fact that some consider him to be an *Islamist* rapper.

In an article in the French magazine *L'Express International* (June 12-18, 2013), the French academic Dominique Caubet, claims that Mohamed Mezouri aka Muslim is the main figurehead of a trend of Islamist rappers. Although Caubet identifies this category as a trend, she does not offer further examples of its followers or details about this subgenre or group. Momo, one of the founders of the music festival LBoulevard, refers to Muslim using this same term in an article for the *Huffington Post* (May 5, 2015): 'il y a le rap islamiste, le rap de Muslim' (there is Islamist rap, the rap of Muslim'.³⁴ In this regard, on his online blog, scholar Yves Gonzalez-Quijano employs the term *rap islamiste* (Islamist rap), also expressed in French, to argue that it is the meeting point of rap and political Islam.³⁵ This idea is reproduced by Aidi when arguing against the idea that hip hop culture and Islamism are opposites: 'Islamist listen to hip-hop, and rappers with Islamist- even jihadi- sympathies abound' (2011: 260). Scholars (Martin and Barzegar, 2010 edited collection is a good example of this effort) have questioned the validity of such broad terms, Islamism and Islamist, challenging their connection with political Islam, another problematic term in itself. Despite the wide range of meanings, Islamism and Islamist are used loosely many times as synonyms of *fundamentalism*, *Jihadism* or *Islamic extremism* (Martin and Barzegar, 2010: 2). Even if commentators do not precise Islamists rap in these particular terms, local ideologies within the political and cultural field suggest the particular connotations of using such a term as Muslim is regarded as Islamist but not as an engaged rapper.

The need for these academics and cultural stakeholders to categorize rappers as Islamists informs us more on the fascination with categorizing and bestowing a political consciousness to Muslim young artists than understanding local and global social, political, cultural, and religious contexts. This definition of Islamist rap may fit in neatly

with the idea of some rappers aligning with self-declared Islamist political groups, as is the case of Tunisian rapper Psycho M according to Aidi (2011: 260). However, including in this group rappers who have never associated themselves with any form of political group that refer to themselves as *Islamist* is highly problematic, particularly in Morocco where political parties are generally discredited and perceived as weak (Cavatorta, 2006: 208; Cohen and Jaïdi, 2006: 72). As stated above, rappers have rarely publicly supported political parties or civil society associations with a political agenda.

In fact, Muslim sees his music as part of his identity and not as part of a political agenda. When I asked him whether he sees himself as an Islamist rapper, he responded by saying:

Muslim: [*Laughing*] I am not an Islamist rapper. I mean, who talks about Islamic topics and all that, Islam is in many things in life. If I say in my songs, don't steal don't do drugs respect your mom and all these things. That's what Islam says, but I don't go deeper than that. I am not a preacher (*Da3iya*). But we still have that Islamic part of our identity. We say for example 'Dounia Fania' (The World is Ending) and we only run for money and there's a day when we all die and this and that, but no deeper than that, like go to pray or do similar things [*Laughing*].³⁶

Muslims songs and much of Morocco's music production mostly reflect the significance of Islam in Moroccan society and do not necessarily indicate a political agenda. In using the term Islamist rap, the fact that many other rappers and music genres like fusion, Gnawa, Aissawa, and Andalusí, to name a few, often use religion in their songs is overlooked.

Islamic faith and Arabic terms have been part of hip hop since the early 1970s, as they are also related to the American racial discourse (Aidi, 2011; Marable and Aidi, 2009) with, for example, the conversion to Islam of Civil Rights Movement leader

Malcolm X or the creation of the Nation of Islam. Explicit references to Islam including *salat* (prayer) or *zakat* (alms) are in the work of American rappers such as Lupe Fiasco or Busta Rhymes, or French rappers like Médine. However, these rappers are not referred to as Islamist rappers (although Médine is often banned by the French media who prefer to promote Sufi rapper Abd El Malik, more in accordance with the idea of France as country of freedom as opposed to “3rd world oppressed countries”). God is very present in US rap as Tricia Rose (2008) claims rappers to be rather conservative despite the way they have been framed as rebellious. Juan Flores (2004: 82) cites lyrics that reference God in Puerto Rican rap: ‘and at night I prayed to God and the holy mother.’ Yet Flores does not categorise this as Christian, nor *fundamentalist* rap. Therefore, while the argument can be made that Muslim’s ethos is religious, labelling him as Islamist suggests a biased perception of his music, in tune with secular liberal narratives that demonise Islam, and depoliticise cultural production these groups perceive as too religious.

Rapper Muslim’s lyrics are varied often drawing on the troubles of the nation’s poor such unemployment and drug and alcohol abuse. In this sense, his songs are not always political, but also deal with ethics and morality. One example is his song ‘Dounia Fania’³⁷ (The World is Ending) (2011) that revolves around the idea of people leaving aside the correct path and the need for religion to save the world from ending, a common trope in Moroccan popular imagery. As Muslim states in the second verse:

People aren’t satisfied, nothing is enough
we ate each other, blessing is an old word
we lost everything good when living became expensive
we were defeated by the devil

we don't stay and listen to those who cry

we don't sympathize with those who suffer

we construct around us tall walls

Muslim ends by affirming:

because it hasn't finished, there is still an opportunity

we have to go back to religion and learn the sacred letter.

In this song of despair, Muslim depicts the hardship of a life where people have lost the right way; the rapper believes lack of morals is part of the problem. This is the rapper's most intimate song, as he told me in our interview.³⁸ Contrary to 'Dounia Fania,' however, in the song 'Law Kan Lwa9i3 Law7a' (If Reality was a Canvas) (2011), Muslim elaborates on specific political ideas by which he would rebuild Morocco. Muslim suggests getting rid of bars and casinos, keeping mosques open and encourages women to wear a veil:

I would paint a long corniche without casinos or bars

Paint many mosques open night and day

Paint the girl of my country covering her hair with the veil

Despite the fact that these lines directly reference Islamic precepts against alcohol and gambling, references to the evils of alcohol are not unique to Muslim's narrative.

It is important here to highlight that while this verse has been controversial, criticisms of Muslim have missed that in the same song the rapper also denounces the practice of bringing illiterate women from villages to work as maids in the cities for very little or no money at all:

I would paint the last girl who was working in houses

And now she has books in her hand and is going to study,

full of dignity

Though here Muslim shows his social awareness of the suffering of the poor by claiming the right to an education for illiterate women, thus urging an end to their exploitation as he does in many other songs, Muslim is depicted only as an Islamist and not as a politically engaged rapper denouncing social malaise and class inequalities.

The demonization of Islamists in Morocco is a response to the challenge that the rise of a party like the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and the Justice and Charity group over the past 20 years poses to Moroccan ruling elites including secular liberal groups (Cavatorta, 2006: 216–217). While narratives that place Islam in contention with Western values of *freedom*, *democracy* and *tolerance* have been widely challenged (Brown, 2012; Mahmood, 2009; Massad, 2015; Nussbaum, 2012), existing reports reveal that Islam continues to be framed in such a manner. Scholars such as Cavatorta (2006), Gutkowski (2013) and Massad (2015) continue to denounce the hegemony of European liberalism in shaping secularism as democratic, liberal, progressive and tolerant, in opposition to Islam considered as undemocratic, uncivil, immoral, and extremist.³⁹ Muslim's condemnation of female exploitation is therefore not portrayed as *progressive* because he is already framed as Islamist and thus backward and uncivil. Because powerful secular women rights' groups believe that Islamists are an obstacle to gain equal rights (Pratt, 2006: 138), the veil proves to be more powerful in determining Muslim's politics than denouncing social inequalities.

The fact that Muslim's politics critically share the Islamist ruling party, PJD, values was confirmed when Muslim declared in an interview in 2014 that he had voted for PJD in order to bring some change to the country; however, he claimed to be

deceived by this party as nothing has changed.⁴⁰ His feeling of deception is expressed in his last album *Al-Rissala* (The Letter) (2014), especially in the song 'Ntouma Ghir Kathadro'⁴¹ (You Are Only Talk) (2014) where Muslim openly criticizes Morocco's Prime Minister Abdelillah Benkirane from the PJD party. Muslim accuses Benkirane of being an actor and washing his hands of the country's problems:

We switched on the TV and found a play of the artist Benkirane

One-man show in the parliament

We didn't understand anything except that nothing is in his hands

While Muslim's lyrics and political ideas may be in tune with PJD's project, the rapper remains as independent critical voice without blindly bolstering any political group.

The poetics of Muslim's rap

Proof of Muslim's popularity may be found looking at social media. While rappers favoured by the State, such as H-Kayne have barely 40k and Don Bigg half a million followers on Facebook, Muslim has 1.5 million. His videos on YouTube easily reach millions of views being the Moroccan rapper with most views in his YouTube channel. During my time in Morocco (2011-2015), young rap fans who I engaged with in conversations at concerts or other informal gatherings often referred to Muslim as a poet suggesting the aesthetic significance of his music for the audience. In 2012, I was at his first concert at Mawazine, a well-known festival with the largest audience and budget in the country. He performed after the rap group Fnaïre, also pioneers of the Moroccan rap scene. The audience in the beach of Salé, a neighbouring city to the capital Rabat, kept on shouting his name during the Fnaïre's performance. When Muslim came out to perform, the audience engaged in singing all his songs proving their devotion to this

rapper. Further, even Caubet is forced to admit, 'his [Muslim's] discourse... is without a doubt the most appealing to the vast majority of the Moroccan society' (*L'Express International* 12 June 2013, p.51).

Muslim's artistry and powerful message is supported by his language use, rhyming in Moroccan Darija, occasionally rescuing words from standard Arabic. This choice sets him apart from other rappers who prefer to draw on tougher street language varieties. He can make rhymes that they cannot. But Muslim has also used vulgar language especially in earlier songs as a way of reflecting young people's jargon. He has used swear words such as *m9awwed*, which can translate as *dope*, *cool*, *pimped* or *fucked up*, frequently employed by Moroccan youth to express something they either regard with favour or, on the contrary, something they dislike. The word appears in an early track from rapper Muslim, 'Zna9i Tanja'⁴² (Streets of Tangiers) (2005), in which he says 'With no ups and downs I know my luck is fucked up (*m9awwed*)'. Despite the different meanings, the word is considered a swear word and not appropriate for use in public or in family contexts. In this sense, Catherine Miller (2012: 179) claims, the use of vulgar language in the public arena transgresses the unspoken code of politeness and often causes indignation and embarrassment. Furthermore, when swear words are employed, almost exclusively by men, it confers the rapper with a sense of masculinity and toughness.

The idea that swearing and cursing in the public sphere is offensive is not unique to Morocco. When discussing the rap scene in Tanzania, Alex Perullo (2005: 96) suggests that rappers, fans, and radio announcers discourage cursing in both Kiswahili and English, as swearing is unacceptable in public. The Turkish rap scene, on the contrary, employs swear words both in Turkish and English, though they are not

tolerated for marketing purposes since they are banned by the Turkish Ministry of Culture (Solomon, 2006: 5–6). In Turkey, this ban acts as a mark of distinction between the underground and the commercial scenes. Where those who do not include swear words are viable commercially, rappers who include swear words in their lyrics do not get their music commercially released and only have recourse to alternative means of distributing their music such as websites or informal record companies (Solomon, 2006: 5–6).

In Morocco, the Audio Visual Communication Law approved by the parliament in 2005 regulates the public broadcasting service forbidding the use of vulgar language. Therefore, when songs are broadcasted in public media, rappers must supply clean versions, where swear words and vulgar language have been eliminated. In this respect, Hicham Abkari, director of the Mohammed VI Theatre in Casablanca, has stated that ‘nowadays, singers sanitize their speech to make it exploitable on the radio, on television during sponsored programs’ (Cestor, 2008). This is the case of well-known groups favoured by the State such as H-Kayne and Fnaïre, as above discussed, but also Muslim’s. Muslim’s newly mostly-sanitised language is related to increasing his access to different social groups and to reach a wider audiences, as he told me:

Look, before, when we were young, we used to rap and from time to time we used to drop a few swear words. But then, when, you see, you figure that your music is only heard by one generation, but doesn't touch other people, your rap is only heard in headphones you can't hear it loud in your house or something, but to me this was not to my advantage. I want to be heard but everybody, so if I want everybody to listen to me I won't lose anything. If with this word means 10 people hear me, I'll change it and then 20 or 30 people will, old and young, in the house and wherever else. It only requires me to change a word.⁴³

Though Muslim's change in the use of swear words can be read in these lines and in connection with the Moroccan Islamist party conception of *clean art*,⁴⁴ his answer indicates otherwise.

Evidence to support this argument is that Muslim has not only shaped his language restricting vulgar words, but also altered his northern Moroccan dialect into a kind of koine – or common language – easier to understand by Moroccans from across country. Some linguists consider that the Darija variant of Casablanca and Rabat as the new urban koine, and see it as imposing on the rest of the country (Miller, 2007: 11; Moscoso García, 2002: 2), though in a latter work, Miller (2012: 180) found that this is not necessarily the case. In this respect, while early songs such as the above mentioned 'Zna9i Tanja' (2005) used more variations of the northern region dialect, a latter song like 'Dounia Fania' (2011) is closer to this koine. A listen to the first song shows that it contains words found only in the north, like *mdakham* meaning *great* or *good* used only in the northern region. Also signifying his regional heritage, Muslim uses the word *pobre*, meaning poor in Spanish, in some of his songs, tagging him as a resident of the regions that were once under Spanish control. This sort of usage of Spanish is absent in the songs of rappers from other parts of Morocco. The change from vulgar to clean language, from dialect to koine and Modern Standard Arabic shows the willingness of Muslim to broaden his audience. Reaching a higher number of people has allowed Muslim to survive as an artist and impose himself as a central figure of the Moroccan rap scene despite the disinterest of media, academics, and state-funded events.

Conclusion

Reporting on voices of opposition requires a deep understanding of local power dynamics within the political and cultural fields. Overlooking rappers with which young

people relate, not only means that artists' voices need to fight harder to be heard, but also that young people's stories, especially those of the urban poor remain unimportant. The interplay of promoting only certain rappers, those that fit into certain epistemologies, while neglecting other popular ones does not seem to line up with the message of *power of the people* or *giving a voice* that many journalists, academics and members of the civil society seem to promote. In this endeavour, commentators have marginalised both Jewish and Muslim's emphasis on class issues and *hogra* that resonate more with young people than on-going global debates on governance and religion. While secular liberal elites in Morocco clung to fighting forms of what they consider as political Islam, meanings of *resistance* which places European liberal secularism as the *good* and Islamism as the *bad* fails to consider the long tradition of narratives of opposition connected to Islam. Moreover, the epistemological stance whereby criticisms of poverty and inequality are not regarded as resistance while critiques of governance are shaped as *political* and *conscious* needs to be challenged as it obscures signs of politically engaged youth. Ultimately, placing Muslim as an Islamist rapper neglects powerful criticisms that speak to Morocco's unprivileged youth by tapping into fears of an Islamist nation and, therefore, demonstrating how fighting poverty and inequality are only compelling when, or rather, if, they are packaged within a European liberal secular frame. Further, more studies that challenge widespread normalised definitions of *resistance* and critical analyses of terms such as *Islamist rap* need to engage with the role of class. Accounts on non-Western rap music need to break from the straightjacket of governance and to be studied for its artistry –flow, punchlines, beats etc.– in its ability to shape local languages, and its role initiating and voicing local and global conversations on class, gender, *race*, etc.

¹ See Graioud and Belghazi (2013) for a comprehensive analysis on the contemporary cultural field in Morocco and its main patrons of the arts.

² I reproduce the names of Moroccan rappers in the way in which they spell them on their album covers or their official social media sites using the alphanumeric Latinized Arabic and not the Arabic standard transliteration. I use this transcription system as a form of respect to the authors' choice of transliteration of their names while at the same time using a system of writing widely used and understood by Arabic-speaking youth.

³ <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html> [6 May 2016].

⁴ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2050022,00.html> [6 May, 2016].

⁵ <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/music/a-song-to-start-something-the-arab-springs-greatest-hits> [6 May 2016].

⁶ <http://muftah.org/rapping-the-revolution/> [6 May 2016].

⁷ http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/11/le-rap-porte-parole-de-la-jeunesse-tunisienne_1463638_3212.html [6 May 2016].

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/feb/27/egypt-tunisia-music-protests> [2 August 2016].

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14146243>? [2 August 2016].

¹⁰ The 20F movement was born in the context of the 2010-2011 uprisings demanding political and socio-economic changes which included calls for better political and social rights, free education, better prices for basic products, and decent wages.

¹¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/06/2012626133253231919.html> [27 May 27 2016]

¹² <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/06/144798285/rappers-imprisonment-tests-moroccan-reforms> [8 May 2016].

¹³ <http://www.france24.com/fr/20120425-justice-maroc-rappeur-mouad-belghouat-rancune-liberte-expression-mouvement-20-fevrier> [8 May 2016].

¹⁴ A case worth mentioning due to the artist's popularity across the region is the Egyptian pop singer Tamer Hosny, who in the midst of his country's uprising, called for the demonstrators to leave Tahrir Square, siding with Mubarak's dictatorship. Days later, when Hosny visited the square to apologize, protesters attacked him requiring the military assistance to take him out of the square (<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/tamer-hosny-egypt-answer-justin-timberlake-attacked-demonstrators-cairo-tahrir-square-article-1.135916> [20 May 2016]).

¹⁵ http://telquel.ma/2012/02/22/mouad-l7a9ed-libre-lautre-notre-maroc-gagne_419 [3 July 2016]; http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120518115526/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+jeune_afrique_Politique+%28Jeune+Afrique+Politique%29 [3 July 2016].

¹⁶ One example is this BBC article entitled 'Moroccans see limits of reform in rapper's case' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15877251> [3 July 2016]).

¹⁷ <http://www.france24.com/fr/20120425-justice-maroc-rappeur-mouad-belghouat-rancune-liberte-expression-mouvement-20-fevrier> [3 July 2016].

¹⁸ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAYZ7R5xmvk> [7 September 2016].

¹⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/17/el-haqed-morocco-hip-hop-revolutionary> [Accessed August 26, 2016]; <http://www.france24.com/fr/20120425-justice-maroc-rappeur-mouad-belghouat-rancune-liberte-expression-mouvement-20-fevrier> [26 August 2016].

²⁰ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYkw14Q3w28> [26 August 2016].

²¹ http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120518115526/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+jeune_afrique_Politique+%28Jeune+Afrique+Politique%29 [3 July 2016]; <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/les-rappeurs-marocains-pries-de-moderer-leurs-propos-51b8e887e4b0de6db9c61e7d> [3 July 2016].

²² Music under the name of L7a9ed was uploaded a day later than YouTube to Skyrock on October 17, 2010 in a profile created on December 25, 2007 (<http://l7a9d.skyrock.com/2939645925-10-wcharwita-klab-dawla-2010.html> [3 July 2016]).

²³ <http://www.slate.fr/story/114445/mouad-belghouat-rappeur-marocain-exil> [29 August 2016].

²⁴ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3GMgKehhk0> [26 August 2016].

²⁵ http://telquel.ma/2012/02/01/ce-maroc-la_329 [27 May 2016].

²⁶ <http://www.marocpress.com/fr/aufaitmaroc/article-95329.html> [3 July 2016].

²⁷ The Facebook post where H-Kayne announced their participation on the 20 February 2011 demonstrations has been deleted. However, in an interview, one of the members of the group confirmed

that they joined the demonstrations that day (Hatim Bensalha (H-Kayne). Interview by the author. Meknes, 2 July 2011).

²⁸ Saad Lemgaddar (Philo). Interview by the author. Casablanca, 8 May 2013.

²⁹ While the rap group LBassline declared their commitment to the 20F on January 2013, they announced through their Facebook page on 8 July that year that they did not belong to it.

³⁰ In Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchemsi's account of the 20F, protesters started to diminish by mid-May 2011 (<http://ahmedbenchemsi.com/feb20s-rise-and-fall-a-moroccan-story/> [7 September 2016]).

³¹ Two articles connect L7a9ed to secular groups: An article on Jadaliyya (http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5252/el-haqed_examining-moroccos-judicial-reform-in-201 [12 December 2016]); and another report in Slate where L7a9ed self-identifies as an atheist (<http://www.slate.fr/story/114445/mouad-belghouat-rappeur-marocain-exil> [26 August 2016]).

³² <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/06/144798285/rappers-imprisonment-tests-moroccan-reforms> [8 May 2016].

³³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15877251> [8 May 2016].

³⁴ http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2015/05/17/rap-momo-lboulevard_n_7292872.html [2 September 2016].

³⁵ <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/3237> [2 September 2016].

³⁶ Mohamed Mezouri (Muslim). Interview by the author. Tangiers, 26 June 2013.

³⁷ See video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ju_13jfl5s [3 July 2016].

³⁸ See note 36.

³⁹ This line of thought is supported by Ayhan Kaya (2014) who cites a number of surveys, polls and reports conducted by the Pew research institute and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation that show the negative perceptions of Muslims in Western European and North American countries. Kaya's chapter also highlights the securitization and stigmatization of Islam in Europe. More nuanced interpretations of this liberal narrative suggest a distinction between moderate good Muslims and radical bad Islamist (Mamdani, 2004).

⁴⁰ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDtRTNX-8VY> [7 December 2016].

⁴¹ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehb5Uvv8APc> [7 September 2016].

⁴² See video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVsRIJmJkFk> [3 July 2016].

⁴³ See note 36.

⁴⁴ For more on the narrative of *clean art* in Morocco see Graioud and Belghazi (2013).

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